

The SAT and the History/Social Studies Teacher

With its traditional focus on assessing general reading, writing, language, and math skills, the SAT, frankly, hasn't had much relevance for history/social studies teachers. That situation, however, has changed significantly with the redesign of the SAT.

An important feature of the test—one based on extensive evidence and reflective of best instructional practices—is its emphasis on students applying their literacy and math knowledge and skills in a wide range of subjects. This across-the-curriculum focus means that teachers in many fields, including history/social studies, have a critical and specific role to play in helping students get ready for the SAT and, more importantly, acquire the knowledge and skills they'll need to succeed in college and career training programs.

This guide is intended to help you, the history/social studies teacher, get more familiar with the SAT, better understand its relationship to the teaching and learning already going on in your classroom, and identify ways to enhance your students' college and career readiness.

Though many of the suggestions in this guide have broad applicability, the information and advice are tailored specifically to history/social studies teachers such as you. We do want to note at the outset that our goal here is *not* to try to convert you into an English language arts or math teacher. Instead, our intent is to show how fostering your students' ability to handle the special challenges of reading, writing, language, and quantitative analysis in your field contributes in a unique way to the literacy and numeracy work going on in your school.

Disciplinary Literacy and Numeracy on the SAT

One hallmark of the SAT is its emphasis on disciplinary literacy and numeracy. Rather than simply ask students to demonstrate generic reading, writing, language, and math knowledge and skills in ways that lack real-world relevance, the SAT makes extensive use of texts, tasks, and scenarios similar to those students already encounter in their high school classes and to those they'll have to deal with in college and career training programs.

In recent years, numerous educators and researchers have affirmed the value of subject-based approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy. Writing in the *Journal of Literacy Research* in 2011, Cynthia Shanahan, Timothy Shanahan, and Cynthia Mischia make a persuasive case that students' literacy development should extend beyond generic communication skills to include making students familiar with the differing demands of particular fields of study: "In addition to the 'domain knowledge' of the disciplines . . . each discipline possesses specialized genre, vocabulary, traditions of communication, and standards of quality and precision, and each requires specific kinds of reading and writing to an extent greater than has been recognized by teachers or teacher preparation programs." Similarly, Kathleen W. Craver, in *Developing Quantitative Literacy Skills in History and the Social Sciences*, argues for a broad-based, cross-curricular approach to numeracy: "Being charged with the responsibility that our students become quantitatively literate has long been the sole domain of those teaching mathematics. In the data-drenched world of the current century, however, it has now become the responsibility of not only history and social science educators but also STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) coordinators and curriculum development specialists to integrate quantitative literacy skills into all aspects of the school curriculum, including the humanities."

Such findings doubtless match up with your own experience as a teacher. In addition to helping students obtain essential knowledge in your field, you work closely with them to ensure that they understand how to read, write, analyze data, and, more generally, *think* in ways appropriate to the subject you're teaching. In so doing, you initiate students into the history/social science discipline. By continually asking students to work with texts, tasks, and scenarios in history/social studies (as well as other subjects), the SAT supports you in this vital mission.

History/Social Studies on the SAT

History/social studies contexts and questions can be found throughout the SAT's Reading, Writing and Language, and Math Tests. Selected questions on all three exams contribute to an **Analysis in History/Social Studies cross-test score**, which gives an indication of how effectively your students can apply their reading, writing, language, and quantitative analysis knowledge and skills in the history/socials studies area.

Let's begin this section with an overview of the history/social studies–related materials on the SAT and then turn to a discussion of the knowledge and skills that are routinely assessed in determining the Analysis in History/Social Studies score.

History/Social Studies Contexts and Questions

The field of history/social studies is represented in various ways on the three required tests of the SAT. We'll now take a brief look at each test in turn.

Reading Test

Two of the SAT Reading Test's five sets of multiple-choice questions are history/social studies related. Passages associated with these questions are drawn from high-quality, previously published sources and may range in complexity from early high school level to postsecondary-entry level (comparable to that of texts required in common college-entry, credit-bearing courses).

- One passage is selected from a **U.S. founding document** or a text in the **Great Global Conversation**.
 - **U.S. founding documents** include the writings and speeches of such prominent political figures as Benjamin Franklin, John and Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison as well as the works of other individuals, both famous and less famous, writing and speaking from roughly the late British American colonial period through the early national period of the United States (roughly 1750 to 1820).
 - Texts in the **Great Global Conversation** include the works of authors and speakers, both prominent and less well remembered, in the United States and

around the world who, across the centuries, have produced engaging, often historically and culturally important texts grappling with issues at the heart of civic and political life, touching on such enduring themes as freedom, duty, and justice. Authors and speakers representative of this category include Edmund Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Carnegie, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Barbara Jordan.

Topically related texts in this category may be paired on the SAT, with some questions asking students to make thoughtful connections between the two texts.

- One passage is selected from a **social science** text. Social science passages cover foundational and applied topics in the fields of anthropology, communication studies, economics, education, human geography, law, linguistics, political science, psychology, and sociology (and their subfields). Social science passages frequently introduce a concept; present descriptive, observational, or experimental data related to that concept; discuss findings; and consider implications. Social science passages are typically accompanied by one or more informational graphics related to the topic under study and about which students must answer questions involving locating and interpreting data as well as relating data to the information and ideas in the passage.

Prior knowledge of the passages' topics isn't assessed; all of the information needed to answer the associated questions is either in the passages (and graphics) themselves or, occasionally, in accompanying explanatory notes (such as an advance organizer or footnotes).

Writing and Language Test

One of the SAT Writing and Language Test's four sets of multiple-choice questions is history/social studies related. The passage associated with these questions is a high-quality, carefully crafted piece written specifically for the test and has a complexity within a range spanning from early high school to postsecondary-entry levels. History/social studies passages on the Writing and Language Test cover historical topics as well as foundational and applied topics in the fields of anthropology, communication studies, economics, education, human geography, law, linguistics, political science, psychology, and sociology (and their subfields). Like their Reading counterparts, Writing and Language social science passages discuss concepts, data, findings, and implications drawn from research and may be accompanied by one or more informational graphics related to the topic under discussion and about which students must answer questions involving revising (or choosing not to revise) a passage in light of the data displayed visually.

Math Test

A key feature of the SAT's Math Test is its emphasis on students' ability to apply their math knowledge and skills to solve problems and analyze data grounded in authentic, meaningful

contexts, including social studies contexts. Test takers can expect to see questions calling on them to consider scenarios, analyze data, and solve problems reflecting real-world tasks in the social sciences. As with the tests discussed previously, prior knowledge of specific social studies topics is not assessed on the Math Test; the questions themselves provide students with enough background information to answer the questions using their math knowledge and skills.

The Analysis in History/Social Studies Score

Overview

To offer greater insight into students’ achievement and to aid teachers, parents, and others in directing and supporting future learning, the SAT reports out a number of scores in addition to the familiar total and section scores. Part of this array is the Analysis in History/Social Studies cross-test score. It’s called a “cross-test score” because selected questions drawn from the Reading, Writing and Language, and Math Tests contribute to the score, giving a rounded picture of students’ strengths and weaknesses.

Analysis in History/Social Studies Score: Contributions by SAT Test

Test	Contribution to Analysis in History/Social Studies Score
Reading	21 questions; all questions associated with the U.S. founding documents/Great Global Conversation passage/pair and the social science passage
Writing and Language	6 questions; all Expression of Ideas (Development, Organization, Effective Language Use) questions associated with the history/social studies passage (questions about sentence structure, usage, and punctuation <i>not</i> included)
Math	8 questions; based in social studies contexts

It’s important to recognize that the Analysis in History/Social Studies score does *not* represent the level of students’ background knowledge in history and social studies. (As noted earlier, all of the history/social studies information needed to answer questions is provided in the tests themselves.) What the score *does* indicate, however, is the extent to which students can apply their literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills to history/social studies texts, tasks, and scenarios. Understood this way, the Analysis in History/Social Studies score offers students, teachers, parents, and others useful, actionable information about student achievement.

Key Knowledge and Skills Commonly Represented in the Score

While the exact makeup of questions contributing to the Analysis in History/Social Studies score varies to some extent from one administration of the SAT to another, several recurring themes emerge from the kinds of questions that students are frequently asked and from the sorts of knowledge and skills that students are routinely expected to demonstrate:

- Command of evidence (Reading; Writing and Language)
- Words in context (Reading; Writing and Language)
- Informational graphics (Reading; Writing and Language; Math)
- Multiple texts (Reading)
- Relationships (Reading); logical sequence, transitions, syntax (Writing and Language)
- Problem solving and data analysis (Math)

These themes, discussed next, are suggestive of some of the approaches you can take with your students to prepare them better for the test and for the challenges of college and career training programs. (Several such approaches are talked about later in this guide.)

Command of Evidence (Reading; Writing and Language)

History/social studies texts (e.g., primary sources, textbooks, journal articles) make extensive use of a wide variety of evidence—facts, data, quotations, and the like. To be proficient readers of these texts, students must understand what counts as evidence in history/social studies and be able to evaluate how—and how effectively—particular authors and speakers use (or fail to use) evidence to support their claims and points. As fledgling historians and social scientists themselves, students must also learn how to gather and analyze high-quality, relevant, sufficient evidence and how to marshal that evidence effectively in their writing, speaking, and presenting.

Several questions on both the Reading and the Writing and Language Tests directly address students’ command of evidence. One approach used frequently on the Reading Test requires students to determine the best textual evidence for the answer to a previous question. In the most common format, test takers are asked to decide which of four brief quotations from the passage represents the best support for the answer to that earlier question. In completing this task, students make explicit their reasoning as they read and comprehend text. (A sample of this approach appears later in this guide.) On the Writing and Language Test, students use evidence, such as descriptive details and data from informational graphics, to add or refine central ideas, develop and strengthen claims and points, sharpen focus, and improve precision and accuracy. (A sample of this approach appears later.)

These and other questions contribute to a **Command of Evidence subscore**, one of the array of scores the SAT yields. You may find this score useful as an indicator of your students’ facility with understanding and using evidence in their reading and writing.

Words in Context (Reading; Writing and Language)

To comprehend challenging texts and to communicate effectively through writing, speaking, and presenting in history/social studies classes, students need both a well-developed vocabulary and a range of vocabulary-related skills, including the ability to determine the meaning of words and phrases as they’re used in particular contexts; to understand how an author’s or speaker’s word choice influences meaning, audience response, and the like; and to use words and phrases effectively to convey information and ideas precisely and concisely, in an appropriate and consistent style and tone, and by means of language structures and patterns that facilitate audience understanding and interest.

As a history/social studies teacher, you're already familiar with introducing students to the specialized vocabulary used in your field. It's important to recognize that you also share with other instructors in your school the responsibility of helping students attain mastery of the broadly applicable high-utility academic words and phrases that appear commonly in writings across many subject areas (including history/social studies). While it's easy to see that many students need help understanding and using such specialized ("tier three") terms as *separation of powers*, *longitude*, and *infrastructure*, we have to remember that they also likely need support in acquiring the relatively common general academic ("tier two") words and phrases, such as *association*, *dispute*, and *integrate*, that show up frequently in readings of many sorts (but relatively seldom in conversation). Though knowledge of these high-utility words and phrases has clear value in unlocking the meaning of challenging texts on a wide variety of topics, classroom instruction too often neglects them because, ironically, their very commonness means they're the "property" of no single subject area and hence the responsibility of no single teacher.

Vocabulary knowledge extends beyond an understanding of word and phrase definitions, as important as that is. Students must also appreciate nuances in meaning as well as the connotations that particular words and phrases carry. Such knowledge allows students to assess how language choice can influence an audience's perception of and reaction to people, events, or ideas. Students may consider, for example, how readers' or listeners' attitudes may be influenced and their opinions shaped when a historian's account or a politician's speech characterizes a grouping of people as a *gathering*, a *crowd*, or a *mob*.

Several questions on both the Reading and the Writing and Language Tests assess students' ability to apply their vocabulary knowledge and skills. While specialized, domain-specific terms do appear in passages and questions, the tests' main vocabulary focus is on high-utility academic words and phrases because of their versatility and their great power in aiding comprehension and communication. Vocabulary questions on the Reading Test address the skills of interpreting words and phrases in context and analyzing word choice for its rhetorical effect. (A sample of this approach appears later in this guide.) On the Writing and Language Test, vocabulary questions deal with precision and concision of expression; appropriateness and consistency of style and tone; and effective arrangement and combination of sentence elements.

These sorts of questions contribute to a **Words in Context subscore**, another of the scores the SAT yields. You may find this score useful as an indicator of your students' vocabulary knowledge and their ability to apply that knowledge in meaningful ways.

Informational Graphics (Reading; Writing and Language; Math)

History/social studies materials often use graphics—tables, graphs, charts, and the like—to convey information and ideas visually and to make interpretation and analysis of data easier. A line graph, for example, may depict population trends over time more quickly and intuitively than could a list containing the same information; a table displaying vote totals for various candidates across several election cycles may make shifts in political affiliation over time more clearly recognizable than could words alone.

Several questions on the Reading, Writing and Language, and Math Tests ask students to use information and ideas presented in various graphical formats. On the Reading Test, students may be expected to locate or interpret data in a graphic or to make meaningful connections between information in a graphic and in an accompanying passage on the same topic. On the Writing and Language Test, students may be asked to draw on data in a graphic to improve the accuracy or

precision of a writer’s account of the results of an experiment or to substantiate a writer’s claim about a historical or demographic trend. (A sample of this approach appears later in this guide.) Questions about informational graphics on the Reading and the Writing and Language Tests focus on locating, interpreting, and using data, not on computation; students may, for instance, have to compare values represented by the various bars of a graph, but they won’t, say, have to calculate percentage differences.

On the Math Test, by contrast, students may be asked to perform such tasks as using the relationship between two variables to investigate key features of a graph or showing an understanding of a nonlinear relationship between two variables by making connections between their algebraic and graphical representations.

Questions making use of quantitative information displayed graphically in history/social studies contexts appear in every administration of the Reading Test and may appear in administrations of the Writing and Language and the Math Tests.

Multiple Texts (Reading)

Building knowledge in history/social studies (or any subject, really) often involves finding multiple credible, reliable sources on a topic, analyzing and evaluating each source individually, and developing with the aid of the sources a unified, sophisticated understanding of the topic. After reading several texts on a particular historical, political, or social event, for example, students should be able to synthesize information and ideas from the sources into a cohesive account that also acknowledges and examines (rather than ignores) important differences or inconsistencies in the texts.

Each administration of the Reading Test includes a pair of related passages on a history/social studies or science topic. In answering the questions accompanying such pairs, students demonstrate that they understand each passage individually and are able to synthesize information and ideas found in the two texts in substantive ways. They may, for instance, be asked to compare the main purposes of the two passages or to describe the reaction that the author of one passage would likely have to an assertion made by the author of the other passage. Paired-text questions are thus not limited to simple factual comparisons but rather extend to such matters as focus, emphasis, structure, and perspective.

Relationships (Reading); Logical Sequence, Transitions, Syntax (Writing and Language)

In history/social studies, it’s important to be precise about the nature of relationships between and among people, ideas, events, and information. Comparisons and contrasts frequently need to be drawn, sequences of events delineated, effects linked to causes, and so on. To be able to trace and establish such relationships in their reading and writing, students must attend closely to various aspects of language and writing—for example, to the order in which information and ideas are presented, the words and phrases used to signal logical connections between sentences and paragraphs, and the arrangement of ideas within sentences.

Various questions on both the Reading and the Writing and Language Tests require students to show an understanding of how information and ideas are or should be connected. On the Reading Test, students may be asked to identify stated or to infer implicit cause-effect,

comparison-contrast, sequential, or other kinds of relationships presented in passages, including those on history/social studies topics. On the Writing and Language Test, students may need to add, delete, or rearrange information within a paragraph to create a more logical order of presentation; insert or revise a transition word or phrase (e.g., *however*, *as a consequence*) or sentence to clarify the relationship between ideas; or restructure one or more sentences to achieve a particular writing goal, such as placing emphasis on a central idea rather than on a less important one.

Problem Solving and Data Analysis (Math)

Students in history/social studies classes will often be confronted, in one way or another, with data. Whether those data are the results of an opinion survey on media use, statistics from a study of human migration patterns, or the outcomes of an experiment on techniques to improve memory, students must find ways to analyze and make meaning from them.

The Math Test includes numerous questions focused on just such analyses. These questions require significant reasoning about ratios, rates, and proportional relationships. As indicated previously, many of these questions are rooted in social studies (as well as science and career-related) contexts, and students answering them must demonstrate that they can interpret and synthesize data and apply core concepts and methods used in the social sciences and in other fields. (A sample of this approach based in a social science context appears later in this guide.)

These questions contribute to a **Problem Solving and Data Analysis subscore**, another one of the scores yielded by the SAT. You may find this score useful as an indicator of your students' strengths and weaknesses in solving problems and working with and coming to reasonable conclusions about data.